Testimony of
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On behalf of the Society of American Foresters
And the Virginia Forestry Association
Before the
House Agriculture Committee
On the
Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act
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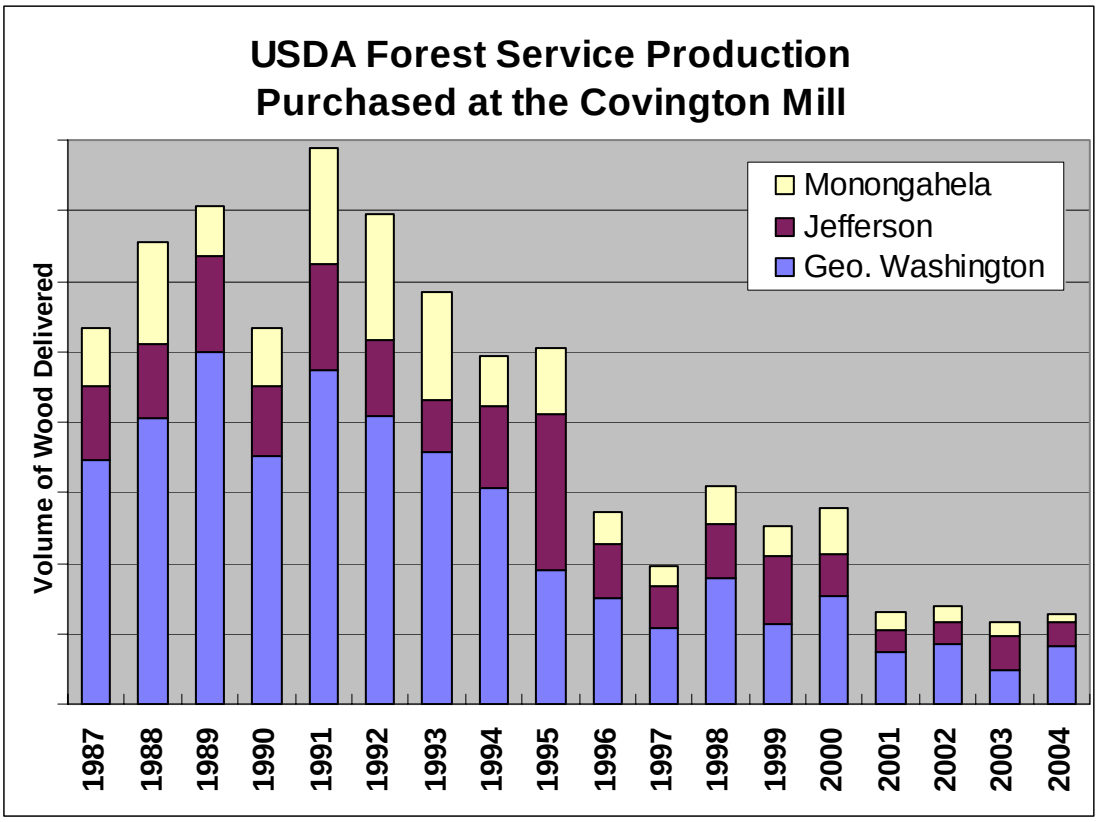
My name is John Hancock, and I am a District Procurement Supervisor for MeadWestvaco Corporation at our paper mill in Covington, Virginia. In addition to representing MeadWestvaco, I am speaking today on behalf of two groups: the Society of American Foresters (SAF), an organization of over 15,000 forest managers, researchers, and educators; and the Virginia Forestry Association (VFA), an organization of 1,400 landowners, foresters, and forest industry employees and businesses. I have held various offices and served on numerous committees for both organizations. I have a Forest Management degree from Virginia Tech, and I have worked as a forester for 23 years.

SAF and VFA support the *Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act* (HR 4200) (FERRA). It will provide federal managers with the tools to respond quickly to catastrophic events on federally owned forests and the flexibility to work with adjacent landowners following these events. Over the last several years, we have experienced increasing numbers and severities of catastrophes in forests due to a variety of factors, including prolonged fire suppression in forests, severe drought and insect epidemics in parts of the country, lack of management to reduce fuel loads in some forests, an influx of invasive species that have altered forests, and natural disasters such as hurricanes. These catastrophes cause immense damage to forests, watersheds, wildlife habitat, and other forest resources and values.

While not specifically part of this bill, I think it is important to note that preventive measures are a critical part of any comprehensive forest management plan. Public land management agencies need to focus on stewardship efforts that maintain a healthy and vibrant ecosystem which will help prevent or minimize the impacts of catastrophes. A healthy forest is one that contains a varied composition of species and ages.

During the 21 years I have worked in the Appalachians, I saw a peak in management activities about 15 years ago on federal lands. Since then, harvests of older trees and regeneration of younger trees has slowed significantly. At the MeadWestvaco mill in Covington, purchases of wood from USFS sales have declined by a factor of five (see following graph). This same trend of declining management activities is reflected in decreased forest health and an increased susceptibility to insect and disease attacks.

Hopefully, the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (P.L. 108-148) and this legislation will reverse this trend.



While management intervention in forests is not always necessary after catastrophes, quick action is often needed to help forests recover more quickly, along with the clean water, wildlife habitat, recreation, and natural beauty they provide. Unfortunately, federal agencies too often get bogged down in time-consuming processes and have limited resources to reforest or to manage for natural regeneration, creating a growing reforestation backlog.

The processes authorized in FERRA will allow the agencies to quickly respond while still maintaining environmental review, public participation, and the opportunity to litigate projects. Additionally, we believe the authority in the bill to develop independently peer-reviewed "pre-approved" management practices through a regulatory process, involving the public, offers a valid alternative to conducting a lengthy environmental review for each project, when the implications and expected results of certain practices are already known.

A rapid response to forest catastrophes not only benefits the environment, but also provides economic benefits. The first savings is obvious: a more streamlined process can help agencies use their scarce resources more effectively. Secondly, wood-using industries such as sawmills, oriented strand board mills, paper mills, and power plants

can use these trees to make forest products or create energy. The forest industry, particularly in the area where I live and work, is a critical part of the economic infrastructure and is critical to maintaining and recovering forests. When dead and dying trees are removed promptly, the value and usefulness of those trees are at their highest and this value decreases rapidly over time. Timely action reduces net removal costs while providing the values and goods people want from the nation's forests.

The value of rapid response was clearly demonstrated at the MeadWestvaco paper mill, sawmill, and forestland near Charleston, South Carolina following hurricane Hugo. MeadWestvaco was able to use storm-damaged trees for a maximum of one year following the storm. After that, the wood was degraded due to weathering, insect damage, and decay to the point that the trees could not be used for lumber or paper. Because effort was concentrated on the most valuable trees, the company was able to recover about 50% of the value and about 25% of the volume of the damaged trees. Very quickly, salvage operations can result in a loss and create hazards for the landowner rather than creating a positive return. The forests were more quickly reforested as a result of our immediate action, and the danger of a subsequent disaster was reduced, such as a fire in the accumulated storm debris.

My work involves in part helping small family forest landowners manage their properties. In the Appalachians, we often have to react to insect attacks, ice damage, wind storms, and occasionally the remnants of hurricanes. Usually within a matter of weeks, or at the most a few months, I'm able to help landowners plan for and salvage the damaged trees, allowing them to at least recover part of their economic loss, to allow the forest to quickly begin the healing process, and to improve aesthetics. Frankly, dead and broken trees simply look bad to most people in addition to the other risks they pose. On federal lands, the lengthy environmental review process, the appeals process, and litigation can drag the process out for many years. By the time this process has run its course, the trees are often no longer usable.

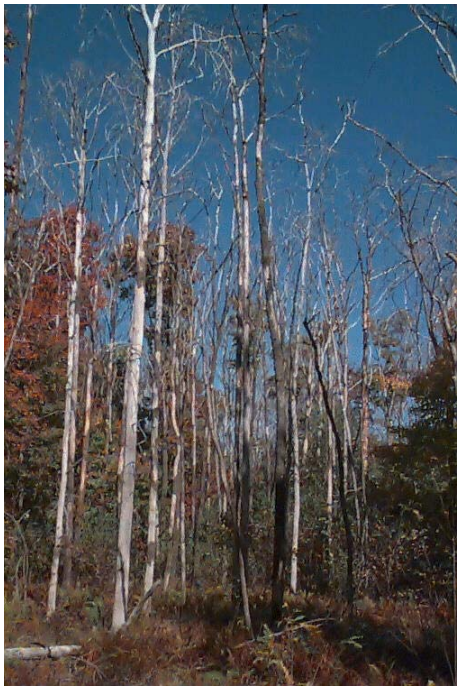
Actions taken in response to catastrophic events under FERRA must follow direction provided by national forest or Bureau of Land Management land and resource management plans. This is important, given that these plans are developed with extensive public involvement and environmental analysis, taking many years to develop. These plans provide a framework for forest management and help to ensure that recovery and reforestation efforts meet the public's goals and objectives for each forest.

Federal forest managers are not only hindered by time consuming processes, they are also limited in terms of technical expertise and funding. FERRA helps to address this by allowing more flexibility to use funds from other accounts when necessary to pay for recovery and reforestation. We urge the agencies to hire employees with the necessary forestry expertise to manage for prompt recovery and reforestation following forest catastrophes.

SAF and VFA support the landscape assessment and research components of the Act. Landscape assessments will allow forest managers to coordinate responses to catastrophic

events with other landowners. Coordinating management more broadly, rather than focusing on a single ownership, provides the opportunity for more effective watershed and wildlife habitat protection. Federal managers also have a stewardship responsibility to their neighbors. If action is neglected on federal land, adjacent private lands may be unduly put at higher risk. An example I often see in the northern Shenandoah Valley includes leaving hundreds of acres of dead trees on federal land following a gypsy moth attack. When this is in near proximity to private land, those neighbors are at an increased risk of catastrophic fire. The many dead trees that remain standing also create a hazard for hunters, fishermen, and hikers that use those areas for recreation. In my experience, private landowners are much more likely to respond to an insect attack and in a much quicker fashion.

Example of extensive gypsy moth damage. Source: www.unk.edu/acad/biology/hoback/escape/images/gmothdamage_sm..



Tree mortality resulting from gypsy moth damage.
Source: www.fs.fed.us/ne/morgantown/4557/gmoth/tour/image29

The research aspect of the Act will help to improve the body of knowledge that is currently available regarding forest recovery and reforestation. We encourage Congress to permit all forestry schools and colleges with the expertise to address this issue to be eligible to participate in Forest Health Partnerships, not just the land grant universities and colleges. This in combination with the research authorized in the Healthy Forests Restoration Act will help to advance the study of the aftereffects of insect and disease infestations in particular. It is important to note that while there is not an extensive body of research specifically examining recovery after catastrophic events, forest managers across the country have extensive practical, on-the-ground experience that adds to the knowledge base. The research aspect of the bill will enable researchers to capture both the hard data as well as the practical knowledge in a peer-reviewed context.

We do have a concern with language in the definitions, Section 3, paragraph 3(c), that contains limitations on "plantation forests" in reforestation activities. The language in this paragraph could be interpreted to supersede land and resource management plans. To prevent misinterpretation, the language should specify that reforestation be consistent with existing land and resource management plans similar to the language that applies to timber harvesting in the same paragraph. Land management plans often provide for multiple-use management objectives while also providing reforestation guidelines that allow the use of techniques appropriate to specific sites and forest types.

Additionally, with regards to the plantation language, the bill rightly seeks to promote "natural regeneration," which means the forest grows back on its own through seeds and sprouts of tree species. However, the language recommending against "creation of plantation forests" could be problematic and could leave the federal agencies vulnerable to unfavorable court interpretation. The technical definition of plantation forests is very

broad, and includes the planting or seeding of trees. Natural regeneration processes can take many years or decades to restore the forest to the desired condition, with increased risk of incomplete regeneration due to the influence of competing and invasive vegetation. In many cases, the regeneration process can be both accelerated and accomplished with greater certainty by planting seedlings of indigenous tree species appropriate to local site conditions—in the broad sense, plantation forestry. There are many instances when planting trees is the best management option for a particular area, and it is important this option be left open to the forest managers to fulfill the intent of this legislation.

A good example here in the east would be planting longleaf pine, where appropriate, on certain federal land in coastal plain areas in the south. The area occupied by longleaf has shrunk significantly over the last 100 years, and now occupies as little as 5% of its original range. On the Francis Marion National Forest near Charleston, public input supports reestablishment of longleaf pine to more of its native habitat. This is primarily being accomplished by using controlled burns. This also benefits the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker, which prefers living in these forests. However, should the area suffer a catastrophe such as another hurricane similar to Hugo, speedy recovery efforts including timber salvage and replanting to longleaf could accomplish many positive forest health objectives. The point is that forest managers should have the flexibility to accomplish the goal of forest regeneration and recovery through means that have the greatest likelihood of success in the shortest period of time.

From my experience prompt response to forest catastrophes is critical. Federal forest managers, like all foresters such as myself, have a stewardship ethic requiring us to act responsibly for the benefit of the forests under our care while protecting societal values. This bill will help federal forest managers accomplish forest recovery with common sense approaches to these issues. In addition, we should remember that stewardship often involves active, continuous management, which will help reduce the numbers and severity of these disruptive events.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.